

Like our students, UK voters should have the option to vote for 'Re-open Nominations'

By Democratic Audit UK

*In the UK, there is currently no formal provision for voters to make a positive abstention. **Chris Game** argues that this is a mistake, and that a 'Re-open nominations' option should be added to ballot papers, as part of a range of reforms aimed at increasing engagement.*



All the same? Vote Ron (Credit: [Dennis Wilkinson](#), CC BY NC SA 2.0)

[Wednesday April 15 was #DeDay](#) – Democracy Day, the start of the final coordinated voter registration push before today's deadline. It was organised, like February's National Voter Registration Day, by Bite the Ballot – a not-for-profit community movement to encourage particularly young people to reject Russell Brand's baleful 'Stop voting' gospel and instead 'make their votes count'.

Currently, its volunteer members, like those of UpRising, the Centrepont Parliament, vInspired, student unions and numerous other non-partisan youth organisations, are working their socks off – partly in the cause of saving the face of the Government and the Electoral Commission.

Remember the Commission's report back in February that the December 2014 electoral registers, the first since last June's switch from household to individual registration, contained 920,000 [fewer entries than those for February/March 2014](#)? It was a tantalising number, which alarmists, particularly but not only of the Labour persuasion, quickly upped and [interpreted to suggest](#) there would be a 'million missing voters' from the 2015 election.

They were wrong – at least mostly. First, there were still weeks until the registration deadline. You can track daily numbers on the Cabinet Office's [gov.uk dashboard](#), and April alone has seen over 750,000 new registrations.

Second, a key purpose of individual registration was to clean up registers and remove duplicate entries, so some 'missing' voters are to be expected and are a kind of proxy indicator of success.

The big qualification, though, is that the most frequent duplicates were students, previously entitled to register twice – at their home address and at their university/college address – although in a general election to vote only once. Some were no doubt copied on to the new register at their home address, and, in the absence until recently

of much voter registration publicity, hadn't yet registered at their term-time address.

It's here, I'd suggest, that Government bodies have been remiss. They've known for five years the dates of the election, the registration deadline, Easter and Easter vacations, yet for months they left all the hard work to others: councils, political parties, Bite the Ballot and similar campaigning groups, universities, colleges and schools.

But those 'missing million' headlines, though misleading, apparently spooked them. Over Easter, therefore, they've been trying to coax college authorities and student unions into organising campus registration events and sign-up sessions – for a student population, most of whom won't come near their campuses until registration's closed.

The University of Birmingham's summer term doesn't start until April 27, and only two of the city's five universities had started back this week. Credit to the student volunteers, then, but certainly those on the UoB library's registration desk haven't been exactly stampeded.

None of this diminishes, though, the importance of #DeDay and similar campaigns, and the embarrassing fact – embarrassing to us as a polity, not to them – that many young people in particular aren't aware even of the need to register to vote. The information simply isn't reaching them.

As Emily Rainsford and Nick Randall blogged recently, we *know* young people live their lives online and do engage in politics in ways other than voting. So why weren't they told about it when they got their NI number – which registration now requires – or texted on their 17th or even 16th birthday?

But the bigger problem is not lack of motivation to register, but to vote – which, as massively confirmed in the Scottish independence referendum, is not the universal youth trait that some would have us believe. Young people, if they see some point in it, will vote almost as readily as the rest of us.

They'll far more readily, though, **not** vote, and in most recent elections, huge numbers have emphatically seen no point whatever – in the limited selection of party candidates seemingly inhabiting a different world from them, in their limited spectrum of policies and self-serving practices, and in the irrelevance and apparent corruption of the whole party-dominated parliamentary system.

So here's my suggested deal. In recognition of students' help in saving the Government's face over a mishandled registration campaign, let's learn from their way of doing elections.

Almost all student elections nowadays have two incentivising features which our national and local elections generally don't, both of which can be seen in the reporting of a typical result from the University of Birmingham's recent Guild officer elections. The first is a transferable vote system – as in Scottish local and most Northern Ireland elections. The second is the chance to 'Re-open Nominations', which at the University of Birmingham we abbreviate and over-punctuate to 'R.O.N.'.

A transferable vote enables you, if your first-preference candidate has no chance of election or has their vote quota already, to transfer it to your second- or third-preference candidate. The voter's stake in the election and the winner's mandate are both enhanced, and far fewer votes 'wasted' than in our Plurality or First-past-the-Post system. Moreover, if you don't have a second or third – or even a first – preference, there's always RON. And if, as occasionally happens, RON wins, then nominations are indeed re-opened and the election is re-run.

It's a positive abstention, similar to NOTA – 'None of the Above': an option that any democratic system ought logically to incorporate, to enable the express withholding of consent, rather than merely abstention or spoiling one's ballot. Numerous countries already offer voters either a NOTA or RON option or the equivalent – like the Swedish/Finnish joke [Donald Duck Party](#) (*Kalle Anka-partiet*) – and the idea is finally being taken seriously here too.

A NOTA option was advocated recently by the Commons Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, as easily the [top choice](#) in its survey of proposals for increasing voter engagement, and has also [featured on this site](#). And *None of the Above: Your vote is your voice* is also the title of one of this year's youth-directed and best

campaign books: by [TV presenter Rick Edwards](#).

So, NOTA or RON: not perhaps the most cerebral electoral reforms, but I'd bet they'd put a few percentage points on next month's turnout.

Note: A version of this post also appears on the [PSA blog](#). It represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit or the LSE. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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